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AUTHOR Nelson, Linden
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ABSTRACT

An interview with Linden Nelson presents his views on peace education and conflict resolution. Nelson, a professor of Psychology at California Polytechnic State University, has a long term interest in research on cooperation, competition, and conflict resolution and in the promotion of instruction about conflict and peace. Nelson answers 13 questions regarding his perspective on Peace education issues. He summarizes his primary concerns with school and peace education as assessing outcomes of instruction, identifying the basic processes of critical thinking and problem solving as educational objectives, and teaching conflict resolution principles that generalize from interpersonal to international. (CK)

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PEACE EDUCATION, CONFLICT RESOLUTION, AND OUTCOMES OF INSTRUCTION

Linden Nelson
and
The Project "Preparedness for Peace"

The project group "Preparedness for Peace" at the Malmö School of Education in Sweden studies ways of helping children and young people to deal constructively with questions of peace and war. As part of this work, experts with special interest and competence in areas related to peace education are interviewed. This publication explores the views of Linden Nelson, a Professor of Psychology at California Polytechnic State University, with a long-time interest in research on cooperation, competition, and conflict resolution and in promoting instruction about conflict and peace.

PEACE EDUCATION: A CONVERSATION WITH LINDEN NELSON, CALIFORNIA POLYTECHNIC STATE UNIVERSITY

1.

ÅB: As an introduction, could you say a few words about yourself and your interest in the field of "peace education"?

LN: I attended graduate school at UCLA and graduated in 1970, and I'm presently a professor of psychology at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California. As an undergraduate my work with YMCA boys' clubs included an emphasis on moral development, and that was probably my first activity in peace psychology. There was a lot of emphasis on teaching the boys self-control in game-playing situations and attempting to teach principles related to moral development.

Then, in graduate school I did my dissertation research on the development of cooperation and competition. Part of that involved a study teaching cooperation to 5-7-year old children, and one of the issues was whether teaching cooperation in one context would relate to cooperative behavior with a different experimenter and with a different kind of game situation. We found that transfer of learning depended on the type of training, but instruction that emphasized principles did generalize. It is interesting how that ties into my current work with students who are undergraduates. This looks at the issue of whether problem solving in one kind of conflict situation will generalize to another conflict situation.

Later I wrote an article with Spencer Kagan for "Psychology Today" in which we discussed the concept of maladaptive competition. More recently my interest in peace education was invigorated by a more global manifestation of maladaptive competition – the nuclear arms race. In the 1980s I developed a course about the psychology of the nuclear arms race, and I coordinated several interdisciplinary courses on nuclear weapon issues.

I became interested in assessing students' attitudes and opinions about the arms race and looking at the effect of educational interventions on students' attitudes. That evolved into an attempt to assess students' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities related to the arms race. I did some of that work with my own social psychology classes which I teach on a regular basis, where I try to include a unit on conflict and assess the effects of that on students' problem-solving ability. My continuing interest is in promoting instruction about conflict and peace. I have done that through Educators for Social Responsibility, Psychologists for Social Responsibility and now

Division 48, Peace Psychology, of the American Psychological Association, and I have organized many symposia at APA meetings and other kinds of professional meetings.

Most recently I have been emphasizing the teaching of international conflict resolution in the same context as interpersonal conflict because my undergraduates are really more interested in interpersonal conflict. So, I am starting to spend more time on that topic and to relate general principles about conflict across the levels of conflict. My research currently is looking at whether or not students who learn to improve their problem solving as shown in essays about interpersonal conflict can then score higher on essays about international conflict, and I have been finding that there is that generalization. Students are more interested in the topic when that connection is made, and they very readily make that connection. In one study, in fact, I found that there was a very high correlation, about .85, between problem-solving ability in an essay about interpersonal conflict as related to an essay about international conflict.

Also very recently I started to develop a scale of militaristic attitudes and have done one study looking at the relationship between attitudes of college students and their parents. We are measuring the parents' attitudes and the child's attitudes, and looking at some of the variables that would affect that relationship. I am getting into that because I think that attitudes about militarism are one of the things we should be most concerned about as peace educators, and we should have the means to measure that, to be able see whether or not our instruction has an effect on militarism.

2.

ÅB: What do you think of first when you hear the words "peace education"?

LN: I think of several things, such as developing cooperative attitudes in people as opposed to aggressive or militaristic attitudes. I think of it as promoting non-violent solutions to conflict, thus teaching conflict resolution ability, and of course it includes learning about war, about causes of war, consequenses of war and alternatives to war, which to me includes the methods of peace making as well as the more long-term approach to peace building.

3.

ÅB: If you think back on your own school days, were there some aspects in your schooling that might be considered an attempt at "peace education"?

LN: I believe so. It was not called "peace education" of course, and even today at least in my country, much of what goes on in the area of peace education is not called peace education by those involved. But I think that there was quite a bit of peace education in my social science classes from elementary through high school, sometimes in history classes, and certainly in political science classes later in high school and into university education. Also, part of my social psychology class at the university level dealt with conflict. I think that when I was in school, there may have been somewhat more emphasis on the study of conflict and cooperation than what you see in the textbooks today, although I see a slight movement toward including that topic again. I think we have gone through a period where for some reason the topics of conflict and cooperation were not even indexed in some of our textbooks, and that is still the case for some introductory and social psychology texts.

4.

ÅB: Do you believe that schools in your country, as you know them today, contribute to a "peace education"?

LN: I have not attempted a survey, but I have the impression that they do, and I think there is great variability between school systems and between individual teachers. We don't have any formal peace education as part of the curriculum in most schools, although there are schools that have introduced conflict resolution programs as part of the curriculum to be taught by all of the teachers. There definitely is currently an emphasis on peer mediation programs and teaching of conflict resolution, but for the most part there is still much variability between school systems and schools.

Another movement that is in full force in this country is the emphasis on cooperative learning, and to the extent that cooperative learning tends to reduce ethnic prejudice which it does and promote cooperative attitudes, I consider that part of peace education. Again there is quite a bit of variability there, but many school systems across the country, and many teachers are switching to a more cooperative structure in the classroom.

There are also many groups involved in promoting peace education, even though it is not always called that. Educators for Social Responsibility, many social science organizations, and some of the elementary education teachers associations promote programs on conflict resolution and peace. So I think there is a trend toward a more explicit attention to this topic.

ÅB: If you think of the different states of the United States, do you know of any particular variations in this respect that might be worth mentioning?

LN: I think we hear more about the programs in larger cities: some of the schools in Los Angeles and San Francisco have peer mediation programs. There is a program with a more judicial emphasis in the Chicago school system. Educators for Social Responsibility have worked with New York school systems, and I know that many of the schools there have conflict resolution programs. So I know of a lot of programs, but there may be states or areas where such programs are not being pursued at all.

5.

ÅB: Do you think it is at all possible for schools to contribute to a "peace education"? If so, what are some of the steps and measures to be taken that you think of first?

LN: I think we are taking some of those steps. The answer, of course, is yes, there is much the schools can do and should do. Probably I have indicated already some of the topics. We should certainly teach about war and I think to some extent we have been doing that. We should be teaching about global and environmental issues and relating that to the topic of conflict. We should support the movement toward cooperative learning in the classroom. Teaching perspective taking or empathy is one topic I would emphasize. Certainly conflict resolution should be emphasized from the very beginning in school, perhaps starting with interpersonal conflict, and then as the student moves through the school system, there should be a deliberate attempt to identify general principles of conflict resolution that apply to interpersonal, intergroup, and international conflict. When you look at the problems of domestic violence, urban conflicts, and ethnic conflicts, you see problems that are as important as international conflict, and the schools should be addressing these topics and improving students' ability to think critically about them.

6.

ÅB: What would be some of the possible differences in peace education approaches among younger and older students in schools?

LN: I would expect, as the child moves through the system, an increasing complexity of analysis. We can look at some of the same topics from year to year, but in a somewhat more complex way, expecting more critical thinking on the part of the student and increased emphasis on the more structural or systemic kinds of analysis of conflict. I also think that as children get older we can be more explicit about the human costs of armies and wars which I think we would not emphasize at the younger ages.

7.

ÅB: If you were an upper-secondary school teacher in a subject with which you are particularly familiar, how would you like to make the students more conscious of and more prepared for problems of peace, within that subject?

LN: I would use cooperative learning as a way of structuring classroom activities, and I would emphasize the engagement of students in the process of problem solving. I would give students conflict scenarios and have them practice the analysis of those problems. Part of the analysis of conflict is to clarify one's own point of view, but also the other party's view. Then I would have students generate various possible solutions and go through the process of evaluating those alternatives. I would emphasize much less the lecturing part. The emphasis if I had the choice would be on students being active.

One other thing I would do is to promote the use of what has been called "constructive controversy". One approach is that of David and Roger Johnson, University of Minnesota. There is reason to believe that students become emotionally involved and very interested in a topic when it is presented as a controversy. Have them take a side on an issue, then switch to the other side, and then work on finding common ground between the two sides. I think this is an effective method of teaching, particularly in the social sciences.

ÅB: I know that you have been interested, in your own work, in trying to evaluate the effects of peace education. How would you try to measure reasonable effects within this area related to what you just have described. Do you think it is possible? Do you think it is easy?

LN: It is not easy in the sense that it is insufficient to ask students to memorize a list of conflict resolution methods. One could easily use multiple-choice questions to see whether students can differentiate between methods and whether they understand them. That is easy, but that does not assess our real objectives here. It becomes a little harder to evaluate the students with some kind of essay test that actually measures how well the student can carry out the problem-solving process. But I think that is what needs to be done, and we need to work on various ways of doing that. I think one could look at the assessment of cognitive complexity in the students' analysis. That has not been my approach, but that is *one* approach. I have been using a check-list kind of approach to cover each stage of problem solving, moving from analysis, to generation of alternatives, to evaluation and choice of a course of action. I use a check-list to count how

many relevant steps and considerations for dealing with conflict are discussed in the students' essays. I certainly believe we can measure those kinds of outcomes and of course, that is one of my major concerns in the area of peace education. It is just too easy to mislead ourselves in the positive direction about how effective we are, and it is often surprising that students don't learn what we think they are learning. So we need to find out whether our objectives are being fulfilled and we need a means to assess instruction so that we can improve it and find which methods work best.

ÅB: Would you say that research and development in this area has done a lot of evaluation or not?

LN: Definitely not. That's one reason I am concerned to work in this area; it is surprising how little work has been done on assessment of peace education outcomes. I think the major means of assessment has been the usual kind of tests of memory and understanding of concepts. It is important that students remember certain facts and that they understand certain concepts, but achieving those goals does not assure that students know how to carry out steps of conflict resolution and problem solving in their lives or as they think about international conflicts.

8.

ÅB: In international debates, the terms "disarmament education" and "peace education" have been used, in addition to some other related terms ("global education", "education for international understanding" etc.). Do you have any comments and preferences as to this terminology?

LN: I think "disarmament education" would be a bit narrow as a term. "Peace education" might imply to some people a kind of indoctrination where teachers are suggesting that one should always use a peaceful means for resolving a conflict. I think there may be many peace educators who believe that, but I think especially in a democratic society where there are a lot of different ideas about how to resolve conflict, that our obligation is to be fair to those who see things differently. Therefore we should emphasize the processes of critical thinking and problem solving. We can compare the non-violent strategies for dealing with conflict with the more violent and militaristic strategies which students are already very much aware of. It might be better to talk about "peace and conflict studies" or to use a term somewhat more general than the phrase "peace education". I suspect among ourselves we will favor the term "peace education" and continue to use that. But when we name a program, in terms of how the public will refer to it, we might want to be careful not to alienate those whose attitudes are more

militaristic.

9.

ÅB: In many countries, questions related to disarmament and peace are highly controversial. Would you anticipate any difficulties, for example with parents or other members of the community, when introducing peace education in schools? If so, what kind of difficulties? Do you see any way out of such problems?

LN: I believe that, when a group feels insecure and they are concerned about making themselves more secure, peace education can be threathening to those who rely on military solutions, because we may be asking those people to give up the very means that they believe assures their security. With the end of the cold war, citizens in the United States feel more secure, and therefore peace education efforts are less controversial now. That is part of the explanation for the increased emphasis on peace and conflict topics. But another reason is that those topics relate so much to domestic and urban kinds of conflict. Of course the generalization can be made to the international, but there is less controversy about conflict resolution at the interpersonal or intergroup level. That does not threaten people as much. However, when a group is threathened by an introduction of peace education curriculum, we should address those insecurities and, as I suggested before, emphasize the teaching of process rather than policy – a process such as problem solving.

10.

ÅB: What needs to be done in teacher training in order to prepare future teachers more adequately for the area of "peace education"?

LN: I believe that it should be part of the teacher education curriculum. Whether or not it is being incorporated currently, I don't know. But I think especially in those courses dealing with how to teach the social sciences, there should be very explicit instruction about the teaching of war, peace, conflict, conflict resolution and so on.

ÅB: Would you also see that as an area for in-service training?

LN: Yes.

11.

ÅB: In many schools, the students represent a variety of nationalities and cultural backgrounds. To what extent would it be possible to use this fact as an aid in education for peace? Would you expect some difficulties in doing

so?

LN: When the teacher is using the cooperative learning structure in the classroom, the usual approach is to form heterogeneous sub-groups within the classroom, and students are much more likely to learn cultural perspectives different from their own. I think the teacher can take advantage of the ethnic differences that exist in a classroom to encourage students to share their different perspectives and their different cultural values and activities. I think that it is probably easier to teach empathy and perspective taking when there are quite different perspectives in the classroom. That can make it more interesting to students and actually make it easier to point out the value of the process.

12.

ÅB: Sometimes the term "global survival" is used to refer to an area dealing both with the risks of nuclear war and with the risks of far-reaching environmental damage through pollution and overuse of resources. How do you look upon dealing with these two categories of risks together in school? Do you have any suggestions as to how the teacher could approach the problem area of environmental damage?

LN: I don't think the two topics would necessarily be taught together, but I do think that the teacher should make a connection between the two and show how environmental issues, such as conflict over energy resources, can be an important cause of war. I think that connection can be made even though the topics may be covered in different units at different times during the school year. I also believe that to the extent that some of the same basic critical thinking and problem-solving processes are emphasized and generalized across different areas of instruction, then the better those processes are learned. So I think the teacher could explicitly show how, in approaching environmental problems and energy problems, we are using the same critical thinking and problem-solving methods that we are using when we deal with conflict between nations and groups.

13.

ÅB: Is there anything else that you would like to add about the school and peace education?

LN: I might summarize a couple of things to clarify what my unique concerns are.

First, there it is the concern that we should be assessing outcomes of instruction. I might clarify that I mean that in terms of two kinds of assess-

ment. One is the formal scientific assessment, a kind of assessment that could be published in a journal where you conclude that one method of teaching works better than another. For example, I have submitted for publication some research which I think shows fairly clearly the benefits of being very explicit about a problem-solving model. One can spend a fair amount of time teaching about an international conflict area without enhancing students' problem-solving abilities in that domain. The early research I did had to do with teaching about the arms race, and we found that a student who would take a course about the history of the arms race and about the technological issues in the arms race did not necessarily get any better when it came to suggesting how to resolve a conflict with another nation over an arms race issue. It was necessary for the student to have instruction in a problem-solving model. So that kind of conclusion can come from some fairly rigorous studies with control groups and using a pre-testing, post-testing design. I also believe, however, that teachers can carry out a more informal kind of assessment, where they learn what works for them by measuring student outcomes relevant to their teaching objectives without having to take some of the more difficult methodological steps involved in scientific research. So both of those approaches to assessment are relevant, both ultimately aimed at answering the questions "Does it work?" and "What works best?".

The other points I was emphasizing were the importance of identifying basic processes of critical thinking and problem solving as educational objectives and of teaching principles of conflict resolution that generalize all the way from the interpersonal to the international.

Some Notes on the Interviewee

Birthdate: March 26, 1944. – B.A., Psychology, 1966. Ph. D. 1970 (U.C.L.A.). Dissertation title: The development of cooperation and competition in children from ages five to ten years old: Effects of sex, situational determinants, and prior experiences. – Professor of Psychology, Psychology and Human Development Department, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 1979 – present.

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